

THE CHANGING MILITARY FAMILY: IMPACTS ON READINESS

by

CECILE S. LANDRUM

When one hires a person one gets the whole person. In addressing the hiring of women in today's expanded and changing job market, employers and policymakers have focused narrowly on whether the woman can do the job—the nine-to-five wrench-turning! What they have not focused on is the jobholder as part of an organization that makes other legitimate demands on the employee, and the subsequent demands the employee and his or her family have come to make on the organization.

Military obligation requires that military members always be ready to meet the mission. Readiness requires that each person in the military be mentally and physically fit, disciplined, obedient, responsive, technically expert, and available.¹

WOMEN AS CAREERISTS

Forty years ago, women teachers could not drink or smoke in public, nor could they marry. In the early 1960's, stewardesses also had to remain single. Today, though women can become lawyers and doctors, in most cases they will also marry and become mothers. Nancy Friday recognized the ensuing problem: "No recognition is given to the fact that in our society it is structurally very difficult to be a mother and a lawyer too."²

Women lawyers who are mothers must try

cases; there are no continuances for child care. Women surgeons who are mothers operate on schedule or they may lose a patient; there are no delays for trips to the nursery. Women in all professions have and manage dual responsibilities of work and home. However, according to Matina S. Horner, President of Radcliffe College, women have historically

... converged on the ideas that femininity and individual achievements which reflect intellectual competence or leadership potential are desirable but mutually exclusive goals. The aggressive and, by implication, masculine qualities inherent in a capacity for mastering intellectual problems, attacking difficulties, and making final decisions are considered fundamentally antagonistic to, or incompatible with femininity.³

Nancy Friday well expresses the resulting differences among women concerning the possibility of handling both a career and family:

Some women can combine full-time careers with being full-time mothers, but they are the superhumans among us, and you cannot base a rational society on all women being superpeople. . . . Other young women recognize that they can combine marriage and a career, but decide they can't be

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mothers too. Says Professor Jean McFarland: 'I feel it's only fair to warn women that having a career and being a mother is worth the effort, but don't think for a second it is easy. Some of our best women are choosing not to become mothers, not because they don't want to, but because they recognize they can't do both jobs well. It's a tragic choice for women to have to make, and society will be sorry.'⁴

There is thus a clear conflict for women in the civilian society as to their ability to manage a career, marriage, and family. Recent trends have shown that women prefer employment and career to full-time family and parental responsibilities.⁵ In the early 1970's, when the role of women in the military was rapidly expanding, 43 percent of the nation's adult women were working outside their homes.⁶ Is the situation of the civilian woman worker different from that of the military? Yes, somewhat, the difference being the requirement of the military mission for readiness beyond that required for a nine-to-five job.

Whereas military obligation has traditionally demanded that the mission come before the family, some of today's military families, reflecting a changing society, appear to place their own needs above the mission. Admiral Elmo Zumwalt noted in a speech in 1977 to a military conference on the family that the Navy is now finding it harder to compete with the family and that spouses are less willing to make the sacrifices they made in earlier years, when the family unquestioningly adapted to the needs of the military. Clearly the powerful claims of family have affected the personnel climate in the military.

The problem of the competing claims of mission and family affects readiness directly, since a key factor in readiness is personnel availability. The question of immediate availability has been raised more and more in recent years in connection with the increased role of women in the military. We shall address this issue further in subsequent pages.

RECRUITING WOMEN

With the decreasing manpower pool facing the country in the 1980's, the all-volunteer force is facing stiff competition from the academic and working worlds. To attract individuals from this dwindling pool, the recruiting emphasis has begun to focus on adventure, learning a skill, and competition—thus combining an occupation with interesting experience.

Military members have traditionally associated themselves with the concept of a calling—that which “enjoys high esteem from the larger community because it is associated with notions of self-sacrifice and complete dedication to one's role.”⁷ There is some indication, however, that military members have begun to perceive their military affiliation less as a profession or calling, and more as an occupation. This changing perception has had a major effect on family and mission conflicts.⁸

Many of the policy changes implemented by the military to attract volunteers have addressed the status of women. Changes came quickly and without precedent, hastened by the predicted shortfall of available men to meet recruitment goals and by external pressures to establish affirmative action programs.

Recruiters often found themselves facing the difficult tasks of meeting numerical quotas and of matching positions with people having particular job skills or potentials. For the first time, women were being counted in meeting these quotas in almost all career fields. The qualifier “almost” is necessary because legal restrictions in the Air Force and Navy and policy decisions in the Army still exclude women from various combat-related jobs.⁹ Often the jobs hardest to fill were those which women were entering for the first time, and about which they had little knowledge. Although the case is the same with inexperienced male recruits, the situation is more prevalent with women now entering traditionally masculine fields.

Many of the women favored entering the services in the more traditional jobs, but

found their options somewhat limited by the resulting concentration. Often, however, they were guaranteed relatively immediate acceptance if they chose one of the less appealing or less familiar fields. In talking to many of these young women, one finds that those who elected to accept such a "guaranteed enlistment," rather than chance a delay, are the ones who were most anxious to get away from home, who owed money, or who had other reasons to seek immediate personal or financial security. Again, the case is the same with male recruits.

Some women with personal problems therefore entered the services and found themselves working in alien career fields—fields in which they met the most resistance from men, and about which they generally did not have realistic expectations. Like their male counterparts, they faced these new situations away from home, family, and friends, often in a foreign country.

Policymakers and operations people had no precedents to turn to in predicting the effects that working in such environments would have on women. For example, Air Force women in the security police field who were assigned flight-line guard duty experienced increased feminine hygiene problems because of the limited availability of sanitation facilities. Such problems are avoidable now with the benefit of experience.

Once in jobs they found undesirable, women were often unable to get out of them because the positions were hard to fill or "critical." Men have also found many of these jobs distasteful, but they usually have been able to grin and bear it. Some women, however, resorted to unacceptable behavior to get out of what they considered impossible situations. In some cases, they may have even resorted to pregnancy; in others, they turned to the use of alcohol or other drugs. Recent statistics indicate that women in nontraditional jobs have much higher rates of attrition, absenteeism, and pregnancy.

WHY ARE WOMEN IN UNIFORM?

Women electing to make a military career add another element to their already complex

challenge of balancing career and family. While career motivations have been the basis for the movement of many women into the world of lawyers, doctors, and engineers—as well as into the officer corps in the military—a large proportion of women recruits enter the enlisted ranks for reasons as modest as material security and job training. Many of these young women reflect traditional values—they want to marry and have families. Therefore, they view their service as an interim period pending the time when they meet their mates and start raising families. ("Our society is still geared to a woman working only temporarily—until she gets married and has a family."¹⁰) Very few 18-year-olds, men or women, think beyond these relatively immediate goals and in terms of long-range careers.

However, the military woman, unlike the civilian, has made a commitment to serve for a specified period of time. Many of her changing personal goals, of necessity, are temporarily subordinated to her commitment to the military. Herein lies a basic difference between military service and civilian employment, even when the job skills are nominally the same.

Other women enter the services to fulfill a different set of security requirements. These are the young single mothers who join the

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services knowing that their dependents will be the beneficiaries of health care, basic subsistence allowances, and commissary and exchange privileges. Before 1969, women in the military could not have dependent children. However, the combination of the 1969 policy changes concerning women with dependent children and the 1973 Supreme Court ruling in *Frontiero v. Richardson*¹¹ opened the door to women's receiving these benefits, thus creating a whole new population of military members for the personnel system to deal with.

MARRIAGE AND THE FEMALE SOLDIER

As we have seen, young enlisted women, no matter what their reasons for joining the service, are approaching the age when they may feel the inclination to marry. Since they are so outnumbered by men, and are often serving in foreign countries or at remote sites far from home, friends, and families, the environment is conducive to making a match to another service member. Recent changes in military policies make it attractive for military members to marry. As a matter of fact, the military as an institution has shifted from a predominantly unmarried force during World War II to a married force today.¹²

When both spouses are in the military, certain benefits become particularly appealing—for example, both can draw basic allowances. All the services are making efforts to assign married military spouses to the same base or to bases within commuting distance. Indeed, this opportunity for joint assignments at times is the basic reason for some "convenience marriages." For example, a person assigned to one base agrees to team up with one assigned elsewhere in order for one of the two to get to the base of his or her desire. In other instances, a couple marries for the convenience of getting out of the barracks without giving up allowances. A recent newspaper account, for example, tells of an E-3 who "had never lived with his wife or consummated the marriage. . . . He and his wife, also an E-3, agreed to marry so they

could move out of the dormitories on base and collect their separate allowances for housing and food."¹³ Such cases are in the vast minority, of course, and removing benefits to halt the practice would unfairly take away entitlements from the deserving majority.

Whether men and women in the services marry for purely conventional reasons or out of less conscionable motives, the fact remains that the services are experiencing increasing numbers of interservice and intraservice marriages. Along with the new logistical, management, and human problems occasioned by this trend, the question of unit combat readiness, as was noted earlier, is raised. Unavailability due to the conflict of family responsibilities, or a lack of job concentration by a soldier who becomes concerned about the safety of spouse or children, can seriously degrade readiness. In any event, policy changes regarding the growing numbers of women, job opportunities, assignment locations, marriages, families, and entitlements have occurred at such a fast pace that their ultimate compounded effects have not yet been completely realized or understood.

PREGNANCY AND NONTRADITIONAL JOBS

Pregnancy places extra stresses on women in nontraditional jobs. While most policymakers concerned with pregnant servicewomen have focused on the women's job capability, pregnancy also makes the environmental health factors much more critical. As a woman's weight shifts, her balance and equilibrium are adversely affected. This shift also causes fatigue, insomnia, and breathing difficulties.¹⁴

These symptoms mean, of course, that pregnant women in nontraditional jobs cannot fully perform their duties for the duration of pregnancy, as they can for the most part in more traditional jobs. Many pregnant women are relegated to easier tasks for safety reasons, but maintain their nontraditional skill codes. This situation does not allow for an honest assessment of the

impact of pregnancy on the operational unit. Concerning a related incident in the civilian sector, the Supreme Court recently ruled in favor of an airline which had fired a pregnant stewardess on the basis of safety considerations.¹⁵

The question that subsequently arises is, How many pregnancies, combined with other absenteeisms, can a unit absorb without having its readiness impaired? Pregnancies occur among only about seven percent of the women in the armed forces at any one time. But owing to lingering rigidities in assignment patterns, particular jobs are routinely filled by young women of childbearing age. Such jobs, therefore, may have much higher percentages of pregnancies among incumbents. Where such jobs are critical or concentrated, the ability to absorb pregnancies is lessened, and the adverse effect of pregnancies on unit readiness is more severe. Presently, the military can cope with the pregnancy rate; however, as the numbers of women increase, the problems caused by concentrations of pregnancies in specific work centers will be difficult to deal with.

A young woman contemplating pregnancy and the subsequent responsibilities of parenthood, particularly if she is in a nontraditional field, must carefully examine her ability to meet the demands of military life. This is especially true when a full-time commitment is required, such as a job involving extensive field duty or time away from home station.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN FAMILY AND MISSION

Interestingly, it was not too long ago that servicewomen who were pregnant or mothers of minor children were officially regarded as detriments to national security. In *Struck v. Secretary of Defense* (1972), it was ruled that these grounds provided a legitimate basis for automatic discharge, thus concurring in the government's argument that such action was in the interest of national defense.¹⁶ This ruling has since been overturned, but in December 1978 the Army announced a policy barring single parents from enlisting—though

they could be commissioned—and requiring single parents and service couples with dependents to demonstrate that their family responsibilities would not interfere with their military duties (except in some family emergencies). If such a demonstration is not forthcoming, military members may be denied reenlistment or can be involuntarily separated.

Since May 1978, the Army has required counseling for first-term single parents and first-term service couples with dependents; more recently, the policy has been expanded to include all single enlisted personnel and service couples. The Army avers that it will not show favoritism to single parents or service couples with dependents by offering them headquarters jobs or by placing them in nondeployable units to the detriment of other soldiers.¹⁷

The Army is aware that the primary cause of attrition among first-term females is pregnancy, and it has clearly demonstrated its concern over the conflicts of mission requirements and family needs in the policy announced in December 1978. But many pregnant women do want to be careerists, and their pregnancies simply add further responsibilities to their already demanding life pattern.¹⁸ However, a survey conducted by Colonel John Williams of the US Air Force Academy's Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership indicated that the vast majority of military couples were adamant about *not* having children. Since most couples interviewed were in their twenties, the women had not yet faced the period of their lives when that decision becomes relatively final. Later in the careers of these women, decisions about children and career conflicts may become paramount.

Many women begin to equivocate as they reach their thirties. This softening of youthful intentions against motherhood reflects a new trend among career women to have their first child in their mid- to late-thirties, demonstrating how fluid family issues are today. If experience bears out this trend, pregnancy problems now generally associated with women at the low end of the age and rank ladders may in the future shift

to older and more senior women. It is one thing to lose the services of a female clerk to pregnancy, for example, but quite another to forfeit the presence of a female first sergeant.

The phenomenon of the single parent has generally been considered a female issue, since it took on prominence when the policy related to rights of single mothers in the military changed. But men are also affected as women choose to leave the children in the hands of the fathers and pursue their own goals. And since it has become more acceptable for women to give up the nurturing responsibilities, the presence of thousands of single military fathers (a far greater number than single mothers, because of the larger percentages of males in the military) creates further concerns about the flexibility of such service members to function during deployment exercises, shift and night work, and other irregular duty periods.

Single male heads of households tend to be somewhat older than their female counterparts and more often have resolved child care needs through a relative or hired help living in the home.¹⁹ Still, child care problems exist. The Army had 11,000 male and 4000 female sole parent soldiers in 1978. By 1979, the total had risen to 18,000, about 2.4 percent of all Army personnel.²⁰

IMPACT ON THE FAMILY

With these and other societal changes, such as the emergence of the nonmilitary male spouse and the nonmilitary-oriented wife who believes in her own self-determination and questions the traditional role of the military wife, military families no longer provide a bastion of complete support for the organization. Instead, they often openly question the organizational demands on their lives (e.g. separations and frequent moves which disrupt spouses' careers and children's educations).²¹ Policymakers must begin to examine these phenomena carefully and plan accordingly.

Little has been done to deal with the effects of the family on organizational effectiveness. Indeed, the effects usually are not recognized

until the stresses resulting from conflicts between family and organization begin to cause a breakdown in the system.²² Until such breakdowns began to occur, family problems took second place or were largely ignored. Social scientists Hamilton McCubbin and Martha Marsden, recognizing the organizational demands on the family in the past, raise the following pertinent questions:

How will these changing situations affect military job assignments, family relocations, and extended separations? And will members of military families become less dependent on the system, more assertive of their personal and family needs, and less willing to subordinate their lives to the orders of the military establishment?²³

The family is now recognized as a cause as well as an alleviator of stress.²⁴ In military families, the effect of family life as a cause of stress and subsequent illness is often intensified because of job-related separations and requirements of mission readiness. McCubbin and Marsden point out that "the family is expected to accept willingly the stresses of military life" and maintain its traditional supportive but subordinate role as stress alleviator.²⁵ Research demonstrates that the family support system affects retention, performance, stability, and career motivation; it is believed to affect also the actual physical and psychological health of the service member.²⁶ Therefore, care and concern by the organization for the military family, plus a strong reciprocal sense of identification with the organization on the part of the military family, is a basic ingredient for the survival of the organization.

Included in this concern by the organization is the necessity to identify and meet child care requirements and similar contemporary family needs. Comprehensive child care will require facilities and personnel to accommodate both initial emergency needs and needs over extended periods of time. Assistance might be needed, for example, during field exercises and temporary duty assignments, as well as during a national

emergency. To prepare for the latter event, contingency plans would be made to provide shelter and medical care. The need for such arrangements is underscored by instances in which parents failed to report for duty during alerts. In some cases, parents have reported *with* their children—and during an alert is obviously the worst time to have young children underfoot. The services are aware of the potential problems in the event of emergencies, however, and have established policies which clearly define the responsibilities to all involved.

Surprisingly, many military parents seem unaware of the real need to make child care arrangements. Many believe there will never be a war, while others state that if a war comes, they are going home with their children. When exercises have been conducted such as REFORGER in Europe and TEAM SPIRIT in Korea, their extensive lead times have allowed those with children ample opportunity to make child care arrangements. However, this luxury will not exist in the event of a crisis.

An additional concern is that of providing constructive activities for older dependent children, particularly after school and during vacations. Sports and recreational programs for children of working parents can be employed to help prevent adolescent problems resulting from unsupervised time. Yet, many of these activities, traditionally a part of normal base and post life for all dependents, have been drastically cut back during recent periods of budget restraint. Often such activities have been viewed as luxuries, not as necessities for all military family members.

IN CONCLUSION

To maintain essential readiness, the services must be able to set practical policy guidelines that resolve conflicts between mission responsibilities and family responsibilities. At the same time, all men and women contemplating entering the services must be counseled to consider their career potential realistically. In light of the uniqueness of the military profession, those

young women in the military who have children, or who plan to have children, must accept the realities of their careers. Whether as flight nurses, loadmasters, boom operators, engineers, pilots, navigators, bridge builders, cooks, or common soldiers, they will have to be prepared for duty at any point on the globe and at any hour of the clock. These facts must be understood and accepted by all parties, both within and without the military. Edna Hunter and Carol Million reinforce this need for realism:

Female recruits have very little realistic information about the military system or military life in direct contrast to male recruits who have considerably more information about what it's like to be in the service. Thus, while men may not like the service, they are more likely to know what to expect, and what is expected of them; women, on the other hand, often do not.²⁷

Societal changes point to acceptance and change. In a tribute to Margaret Mead, Colman McCarthy refers to the fact that she was not "carried away by what seemed to many women in 1968 as a new issue. . . . [She] refused to encourage women to believe the cant that their victimization excused them from demands of intelligence and grace."²⁸ It has been easier, generally, for women to "opt out." As a result, we have few female role models who have successfully managed military careers and family.

Those in the military, and those entering the military, must accept their military and family responsibilities and seek to solve the conflicts therein intelligently. And, with the realization that family and mission are competing for a service member's time and commitment, policy considerations must work to alleviate the ensuing stress, if the force is to be mission-ready.

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